

MINUTES

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEPAC Meeting
Sheridan County Courthouse Jubilee Room
Plentywood, MT**

October 22, 2009 (Meeting 3)

Advisory Council Members Present: Rep. Julie French, Chairwoman, Mike Begley, Jay Gore, Bernie Hart, Gordon Haugen, Bill Howell, Mike Jensen, Joe Perry, Craig Roberts, Dale Tribby.

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present: Harold Wentland, Pat Gunderson, Brad Schmitz, Scott Thompson, Rick Northrup, Quentin Kujala, Michael Nye, Kelvin Johnson, Drew Henry, Debbie Hohler

Guests: None

1. **Opening.** Chairwoman French called the meeting to order at 8:00 am.
2. **Meeting focus.** The meeting focus was on upland game bird releases and emergency supplemental feeding. Discussions continued on the strategic plan outline.

Minutes from July 7, 2009 were approved with the following corrections noted:

- Include Gordon Haugen's task to put together questions for Mary Sexton, DNRC Director, with Debbie Hohler's input.
- Add Brad Schmitz to the list of FWP staff attending the September meeting.

Action: Joe Perry moved and Jay Gore seconded the motion to accept minutes. Motion carried.

3. **Discussion regarding Public Meeting (October 21, 2009).** Regarding information provided by Mr. Ed Smith on pheasant releases in South Dakota and a comparison of bird releases in Fergus and Sheridan counties, the council clarified the following:
 - a. The state of South Dakota does not pay to release pheasants. Clarified that pheasant releases made in South Dakota are on shooting preserves. (Roberts)

- b. South Dakota information came from shooting preserves data. (*Haugen*)
 - c. The assertion that increases in pheasants harvested in Sheridan County because of pheasant releases has not been definitively proven. In Fergus County, more acres have been closed to hunting, therefore not an appropriate comparison. (*Tribby*)
4. **Expenditures handout.** Debbie provided a list of projects and estimated costs to the council. Discussion points:
- a. Need to see what funds are coming from what types of licenses.
 - b. Need to know what will be available for projects after committed costs are determined.
 - c. In addition to 4 FTEs, need to keep in mind the MOUs that are ongoing expenses. Discussion followed addressing the need to hire a “people person” who is able to leverage funds from other sources. Council reiterated the need to proceed to fill these 3 UGB positions.
 - d. **Council needs a balance sheet that shows revenues coming in, existing expenditures, and projected future revenues and expenditures.**

Mike Jensen and Mike Begley will formulate questions to FWP for a budget presentation at the January 2010 meeting in Helena.

5. **Release Program.** In NE Montana, the pheasant release program is primarily promoted by the pheasant raisers: they solicit landowners and generate applications to give to Scott Thompson, Management Biologist, by May 15. Scott described project site evaluations, including verification of landownership, and the need to ensure signs are in place. Scott handed out a spreadsheet reporting Region 6 upland game bird harvest by county. (*Thompson*)

This spreadsheet is available online at the Council Web page (<http://fwp.mt.gov/habitat/uplandgamebird/meetingHandouts2009.html>) under Meeting 3 – 2009-10-23 UGBEPAC – R6 Upland Game Bird Harvest.

- a. Council needs to develop guidelines that will be in place that will be followed in the future. (*Rep. French*)
- b. Are annual site evaluations necessary? Scott Thompson stated that if it’s a new site or if habitat/land-use change, then yes. Suggestion to carry-over evaluation from prior year if no significant change. (*Perry*)
- c. There is validity from an economic standpoint to release pheasants. At times, there can be mild winters. It would be wise for the council to

develop criteria to help determine if pheasant releases are warranted.
(Tribby)

- d. Discussion on other funding sources for pheasant releases: landowner cost-share, Pheasants Unlimited.
 - e. Regarding pheasant releases: Is it done for establishing populations or augmenting populations? The habitat evaluation (site assessment) assumes the area is void of birds. This is not always the case. (Begley)
 - f. Suggestion to accept pheasant releases. Examine last 5 years and review what has taken place. Recommend placing a cap on pheasant releases. There is recognition of the importance of pheasant releases in northeast Montana but need to move on to habitat side of program. (Gore)
 - g. Clarification that pheasant releases do take place in other parts of the state (Schmitz).
 - h. In addition to pheasant releases, must remember that wild turkeys are included in the statute – council cannot forget this part of the program.
(Tribby)
6. **Council discussion on Strategic Plan Outline (Upland Game Bird Release and Supplemental Pheasant Feeding Projects.**
- a. **(i) Release Projects: How do they fulfill Program goals?**
 - Opens land to hunting access.
 - Social aspects may open up opportunities for habitat work.
 - Suggest a feedback loop to incentivise: provide access plus incentive to do more habitat work. (Begley) If continued stocking, landowner also needs to establish habitat enhancements – use one to facilitate the other. (Haugen)
 - Discussion on re-establishing permanent pheasant populations: Need to (re)establish permanent populations, but is the Program meeting this goal without knowing 60/40 ratio is being achieved? Perhaps we should release hens for future production, not roosters? (Begley)
 - Even after a tough winter, the habitat will still have pheasants in the spring. The numbers will be depressed because of weather conditions, but there still is a “permanent” population. (Haugen)
 - By definition for establishing birds, there wouldn’t be a need if they are already there. How is it best to make recommendations to FWP? Pheasant releasing is legally required and some local people want it. How can the Program incentivise landowners even more? Possible to address habitat needs? (Begley)

- Discussion on the usefulness of banding pheasants to get a sense on returns to the hunter. (Howell)

The department needs a clear understanding of what is needed in terms of bird releases. What is the objective – 15% of funds? Forty percent hens? What is council's recommendation for criteria to measure/quantify success? Council will need to identify recommendations for performance measures. Is 15% expenditure the goal? (Kujala)

- Suggestion of a minimum of 15% used for releases and placing a cap on this amount. Consider augmenting pheasant populations during years when bird numbers are down. Possibly base this need on Council's recommendation. Council could provide direction, cap, and how to carry over year to year. (Haugen)
- Need to consider the lag time in the decision making process. Responsibility should fall with regions to determine weather criteria. Need to make existing criteria "visible." (Perry)
- Possible to keep standard approach with same number of birds released each year, but place a cap on funding. (Gore)
- Possible to increase expenditure percentage during a tough winter but reduce percentage during milder years. (Haugen)
- FWP staff will put together draft criteria for the supplemental feeding criteria/approach. A cap of 20% will be considered.

Dale Tribby suggested the following wording related to pheasant release and emergency supplemental feeding:

"Suggest the UGBEP Advisory Council endorse that 15% of annual revenue be dedicated to pheasant releases and supplemental feeding. In years when pheasant releases and/or supplemental feeding are not warranted, unspent dollars will be set-aside in a dedicated account for future use. Based on average program revenue over the most recent 5 years, no more than 25% of the 5-year average may be spent on pheasant releases and supplemental feeding in a given year. This 25% cap would comprise 15% of annual revenue with the remainder drawn from the set-aside account, if available."

- Recommendation to think habitat first – important to be proactive. Feeding is another important component as conveyed by people attending the public meeting. (Begley) General agreement from the council noted.

- Proactive approach is planting Russian olive trees – serves the purpose of food and cover needs.

Action: The Council recognizes the value of Russian olive as an effective source of food and woody cover outside of riparian areas and sub-irrigated habitats. Jay Gore seconded the motion. Motion carried.

- Stretchberry (New Mexican olive) may be another species to consider. USDA Plant Materials Center, Bridger, is evaluating. Not sure if deer eat this tree. (Roberts)

b. Discussion on application and contracting processes. How much to pay for birds; how determine value? Request For Proposals (RFP)? What is the potential to prioritize pheasant projects?

- Money should go to release sites near urban settings. Possible youth hunting opportunities? (Gore)
- If demand exceeds supply, a random draw is unacceptable. Need to look at priority areas based on these criteria: habitat quality and the need to release. Some regions or areas may have a greater need and value than other regions. Access is another filter. Consider cost if it's a competitive process. (Tribby)
- Open bidding may help. As a hunter, would expect agency to look for lowest price. (Begley)
- Recommendation of a bidding process because it provides quality control. (Haugen)
- Council needs to consider the impacts to pheasant raisers. (Hart, Rep. French)

In the interim, how shall the department proceed with pheasant releases? A letter will need to go out ASAP to pheasant raisers.

- In the letter, be upfront and state what the financial limit will be. State that the Advisory Council is working to develop guidelines for the release program. Send the letter out earlier and be more open as to the decision and why it was made. (Rep. French)
- In the interim, communications to pheasant raisers may reference practice to date, the ongoing council work, and the recognition of 15% as a cap. (Kujala)

Continued discussions and proposed suggestions for Release Program and Feeding Program.

- Consider removing the “at least” wording in statute for the 15% expenditure for pheasant releases. This must go through the Legislature.
- Recommendation of a competitive process for pheasant raisers. (*Begley, Perry*)
- Money set aside for pheasant release includes emergency supplemental feeding.
- Consider pool of funding that accumulates over 5 or 6 years to make available. Refer to Tribby’s statement on page 4.
- There is a disconnect with pheasant release/feeding and habitat. If a landowner participates in emergency feeding one year, a major emphasis would be to establish food plots and shelterbelts the following year. (*Johnson*)
- Development of a “township concept” to identify what habitat components are needed in an effort to interrelate habitat projects on a larger scale; this will also promote interaction with landowners. From a hunting standpoint, it’s preferable to see vast amounts of habitat rather than “pockets.” (*Haugen, Johnson, Begley*)
- Pheasant Forever’s model “Habitat Wheels” identifies an existing block of land that has quality habitat that forms the hub. Work with adjacent landowners to establish/enhance wildlife habitat radiating from the hub like spokes. This concept could mitigate feeding/releasing by providing the proper habitat. Otherwise, we could be releasing/feeding indefinitely without the habitat component in place. (*Roberts*)
- The Sheridan County MOU identified focus areas and habitat components that need to take place. (*Thompson*)
- Regional strategic plan development would occur at the regional level and must also consider financial picture. (*French*)

7. **Potential UGBHEP on State lands.** Gordon Haugen provided an update to the Council. There is a potential project site north of Havre on DNRC lands. The lessee is very enthusiastic about recommendations on his lease. Requested the council review the UGBEP/DNRC policy questions (attached to September minutes). Tom Pick, NRCS staff who has worked with Gordon on this project, will leave for Iraq on November 2, 2009. Gordon would like to proceed as a PF member, rather than a Council member, and will give a report at the next meeting January. Gordon plans to meet with Mary Sexton, DNRC Director, in the near future.

8. **Region 6: Program Priorities and Strategic Implementation.** A general discussion followed with input from regional staff. Region 6 staff thanked the Council for the opportunity to participate. Staff emphasized that the regional priorities are access and habitat.

- Council has had the opportunity to hear about the pheasant release program and supplemental feeding program. There are also other important aspects of the UGBEP in Region 6. We need to look at opportunities to affect upland game bird numbers and recruitment. Grazing systems are important for sharp-tailed grouse and sage-grouse. Much of this work has occurred in Richland County. Nesting cover is important to annual production. FWP hasn't been cost-sharing on CRP because they are requiring better seed mixes. Conservation easements provide long-term habitat and access, and the region has done well working with willing landowners.

Landowners typically call FWP or NRCS. This approach leads to pockets of habitat without strategic development. This is something a strategic plan can address. Most of the work has occurred in the eastern third of the region due in part to the agriculture and private lands that are open to hunting. Block Management offers opportunities because the access component is already addressed. Partnering opportunities with other agencies and organizations has been key. NRCS has been very important. (*Thompson*)

- **Milk River Initiative:** Craig Roberts, Joe Perry, Harold Wentland, Pat Gunderson, Bernie Hart, Gordon Haugen, Jay Gore, Bill Howell, and Rick Northrup attended the tour southwest of Glasgow.

The goal is to conserve 10,000 riparian acres of the Milk River bottom through purchasing certain conservation values in perpetuity. Focus areas have been identified based on wildlife values associated with river stretches. The region targets the best habitats. The landowner is still able to perform agricultural activities, keeping landowner on the land. The landowner still pays taxes.

County Commissioners have been generally positive and supportive of conservation easements. They recognize the economic benefits but also realize an alternative is landownership changes that likely lead to closing off land to the public.

Continued partnership with Canyon Ferry Trust and the NRCS was emphasized. (*Johnson*)

Issues identified by Region 6:

1. There is a need to maintain and monitor existing projects while initiating new projects.
2. Efficiently implement feeding/stocking programs in balance with habitat.
3. There is a continued need to keep up with Farm Bill programs.
4. For the new UGB biologist, there is a need to focus efforts and develop expertise to share with others. Also need to continue working on projects that allow access or are enrolled in Block Management.

- **Block Management in Region 6.**

There are focus areas for Block Management, especially the Bears Paw and Plentywood areas. Applications come from the landowner, and areas are prioritized for access with game population objectives considered. The region works to accommodate landowner needs and FWP objectives.

There are about 1.3 million acres enrolled in Block Management (Region 6). This number includes a lot of public land that otherwise would not be accessible. There are 2 kinds of Block Management Areas: individual and aggregate (involving multiple landowners). Each enrollment develops a lasting relationship that can include game damage assistance and other help from the department. In addition to a hunter-impact payment (landowner payment), the landowner also gets an enrollment payment (\$250); a complimentary Sportsmen's license; *Montana Outdoors* magazine; and the inclusion of a liability clause.

Wrap-up, Review Assignments, and Adjourn.

Rep. French noted that she spoke with a hunter during the open house meeting (Oct. 21, 2009) who wanted to emphasize the need to address sage-grouse issues.

Next meeting will be held January 20-21, 2010 in Helena. The focus of the meeting will be on the UGBEP budget and continuation of discussion of the strategic plan outline.

Council budget to date: TBD